

Washington State Patrol Media Release

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*****For Immediate Release*****

April 29, 2005

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Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) and 9-1-1 Emergency Calls

Help May Not Be on the Way

Caution: 9-1-1 Calls over the Internet May Not Result in Dispatched Help

Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) is changing the shape of the telecommunications industry. It allows people to use the Internet as the means to make phone calls. For those with high-speed Internet access, the Internet telephony equipment provides inexpensive telephone calls, sometimes worldwide! While VoIP moves voice calls through the Internet at a considerable speed and cost savings to the customer, it does come with its own price tag. That cost could be to your own personal safety.

Internet users are cautioned about expectations of receiving help from calls placed to 9-1-1. Don't expect the same immediate response from an Internet call to 9-1-1 as you would from placing calls to 9-1-1 from your telephone. First of all, you may not have the ability to call 9-1-1 from your VoIP phone. And, if you could dial 9-1-1, the call may not be routed to the emergency call taker responsible for sending help your way. There would be no automated display of your location information nor will your call be recognized as occurring on the 9-1-1 call management network. If you can dial 9-1-1 from the VoIP phone, it will be as if you dialed a 10-digit emergency number. You will have to be able to tell the call taker where to send help.

VoIP currently is not government regulated. The VoIP and Internet industries have no 9-1-1 emergency calling requirements in place. While the Internet VoIP industry is participating in setting voluntary practices toward provision of enhanced 9-1-1 service, it is just that – voluntary. It is also only in the developmental stages. Access consistency and reliability on behalf of all Internet VoIP providers will be vital to the delivery of 9-1-1 emergency response.

In time the Internet phone calls may be able to provide to the 9-1-1 call taker the same information as we have come to expect from wired and wireless telephones. Until then those using VoIP to call 9-1-1 should anticipate that this advanced telephone service is a step back to the days when you needed to know the 10-digit police, fire or medical emergency telephone number to call for help.

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